

George G. Burkley, 88, Dies; Physician for JFK and LBJ

Post 1/4/91
George G. Burkley, 88, a retired vice admiral in the Navy Medical Corps who was the White House physician under Presidents John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson, died of pneumonia Jan. 2 at Nazareth House, a nursing home in Los Angeles.

Adm. Burkley, whose medical specialties were internal medicine and cardiology, began his Navy career in 1941 as a lieutenant commander. During World War II, he served in the South Pacific. Subsequent assignments took him to various Naval hospitals in this country, and in 1957 he was ordered to Washington as commander of the Naval Dispensary.

For the next decade, his life turned largely on the comings and goings of the occupants of the White House. In addition to his regular duties, he was named physician to Camp David, the presidential retreat in the Catoctin Mountains, and in 1959 he accompanied President Dwight D. Eisenhower on his tour of the Far East.

In 1961, with the advent of the Kennedy administration, Adm. Burkley was named assistant White House physician under Janet Travell. He later succeeded Travell as White House physician, and he was appointed Kennedy's personal physician. He held the same posts under Johnson.

Adm. Burkley was in the motorcade when Kennedy was assassinated on Nov. 22, 1963. He was riding several cars behind the president when the shooting occurred, and emergency measures already had been started when he arrived at the hospital. He accompanied the body back to Washington. On later presidential trips, he made sure he was always closer to the president.

In 1968, at the end of the Johnson administration, Adm. Burkley retired. He lived in Chevy Chase until 1970, when he moved to Blairsville, Pa. He had lived in Los Angeles since 1975.

Adm. Burkley was born in Pittsburgh. He graduated from the University of Pittsburgh, and he also received his medical degree there. From 1929 to 1932, he studied at the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minn.

He then returned to Pittsburgh, where he practiced medicine and taught at the University of Pittsburgh medical school until he went into the Navy.

His wife, the former Isabel Winburn, died in 1973.

Survivors include four children, Isabel Starling of Elkview, W.Va., Nancy Denlea of Los Angeles, George W. Burkley of Volcano, Hawaii, and Richard M. Burkley of Boulder, Colo.; a sister, Teresa Wunderlich of Miami; 19 grandchildren; and three great-grandchildren.